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Review · Sanford J. Smoller

Prose and Cons by Felix Pollak. La-Crosse, Wisconsin: Juniper Press. 1983.

“As always, language itself gives the show away,” writes Felix Pollak in “Never Say Die,” a satire on how the aged are deluded by euphemisms. Despite the evidence of their senses and the obituary columns, which tell them daily that the bell which tolled for their friends will soon toll for them, the old are gulled by nursing homes that want their bucks and by politicians who want their votes into believing they are *senior citizens* living in their *golden years* before they go to their future *just reward*. But what is wrong with a few little lies if they make someone feel better? “Nothing,” says the moral relativist for whom all things are personal. “Everything,” says the writer for whom personal and public language is the same. For lies—“that which are not”—pervert language and thus understanding, and from this perversion flows the corruption of literature, justice, commerce, and politics. Swift, Twain, and Orwell, among others, have taught us this before, of course, but that was back in English 101. Now, Felix Pollak, with the authority earned from a lifetime of study, observation, and reflection, here teaches us once again what we were too dense or forgetful to learn then: that the truth brooks no evasions, no circumlocutions, no circumventions, that realities must be faced “head-on as they are.”

Prose and Cons is a selection of Pollak’s essays ranging over more than twenty years. “Never Say Die” and “Request Denied” are the most recent, having been published in May 1981 and November 1982, respectively, in *The Progressive Magazine*. “Request Denied” is a biting, ironic commentary on the refusal of the Indiana prison authorities to allow condemned murderer Steven Judy four cans of beer with his last meal. Recalling Nietzsche’s pun on the etymological similarity (in German) of justice and revenge, Pollak observes wryly that because Judy was “innocent enough to give his executioners a chance to salve their bruised egos and ‘get even’ with him, . . . they were able to teach him the final lesson to take with him into that questionable Hereafter: that even the most cynical criminal may not be cynical enough for the world of the just in which he

lives.” A recurring TV ad shows a sourdough donning his mackinaw and snowshoes to brave two hundred miles of ice and snow for a Stroh’s beer. But poor Judy had to walk his last mile without his can of Stroh’s or Bud or Miller Lite. For a good ol’ boy that is indeed a punishment worse than death. Those just prison authorities knew how to exact their revenge.

During Pollak’s tenure as Curator of Rare Books and Special Collections (which includes the important Sukov collection of little magazines) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison was a hub of radical and counter-culture activity. Always attentive to new forces in writing, he assembled an annex to the little magazine collection consisting of over 100 titles from the Underground Presses. In “Ups and Downs” (first published in 1970), Pollak surveys these publications in relation to the commercial, Establishment press (and the values it represents) which they tried to subvert and which, in turn, with the aid of the courts and cops, tried to suppress them. He also focuses on the leading underground publishers and editors, some of whom faced jail terms for (naïvely?) believing in the inviolability of the First Amendment, and in the causes their sheets espoused—everything from veggie diets to violent revolution to drugs to doing it in the road.

A fierce partisan in the cause of free speech, Pollak sympathized with these “visionary termites” (a marvelous image) who sought to gnaw at “the pillars of the military-industrial complex” until the whole rotten structure collapsed upon itself. Yet, in hindsight, though discerning then that the survival of the “counter-action press” depended heavily on the continuation of the Vietnam War, campus unrest, the generation gap, and social and racial tension, he may have been too sanguine about the staying power of the “counterculture and its harbingers.” Perhaps Pollak put too much stock in the notion (as many of us did) that white middle-class kids, who comprised the vast majority of the counterculture, would betray their class and beat down their own parents’ homes. When the war ended, the campuses returned to business as usual, and the erstwhile revolutionaries to the study of business administration. As the media informed us (*ad nauseum*) during Gary Hart’s roll through the New England primaries, the undergrounders of the late ’60s and early ’70s have become the Yuppies of the ’80s. But Pollak cannot be faulted for not being prescient, for who in 1970 could have foreseen that Ronald Reagan would be President a decade later? If Pollak underestimated the conservatism in the American body politic, he was certainly not alone.

“Ups and Downs” is required reading for anyone wanting to know how it was when, probably for the last time in this century, everything seemed possible—the end to imperialistic wars and to social, economic, and racial injustice, and the creation of a free press not “committed to advertising interests and the preservation of the *status quo*.”

Having published poems and essays in over 100 little magazines and quarterlies, Felix Pollak found in them not only his bread and butter, but also the meat and drink of his imagination. From 1960 to 1976 he contributed a number of essays reflecting his view of the place and function of little magazines in modern literature. Selections from these essays have been combined in “Excerpts from Various Essays on Little Magazines,” which is the centerpiece of *Prose and Cons*. Although each piece (for example, *The Little-Mag Spirit, On Growth, Littleness and Elitism*) is self-contained, these excerpts, taken as a whole, form as eloquent a statement on behalf of little magazines as one is likely to find anywhere. Here is Pollak on the essence of the little magazines:

It is a spirit of wide-openness and receptivity to new ideas, theories, movements, and experiments; a stubborn refusal to conform to conventions and *mores*; an air of independence, a fervid antagonism against fetters and trammels and chains and strings of any kind; a stance of active resistance against the theory and practice of censorship and taboo. It is, in other words, the spirit of individualism, lacking in any of the established and respectable publications—lacking not by coincidence but by their very nature. Bound to advertising interests and circulation figures, the commercial magazines cannot afford the attitude of rebellion. The little magazine spirit, on the other hand, is free and gay and irreverent and deadly earnest and intense, pugnacious and ebullient, often irresponsible, always irrepressible.

However various, little magazines enlivened with this spirit are all organically connected. When one falls another grows to replace it.

And yet little magazines are not indestructible. The soil that supports them can be polluted by the seeping in of “a mass mentality that increasingly determines . . . our intellectual and spiritual values and threatens to culminate in the uniformity of cultural zombiism.” Their vitality can be

sapped by editorial timidity and “wishy-washiness,” by eschewing “extreme, radical, heretical” writing, by a stifling, vapid neutrality. They can topple under their own weight by growing too large, thereby tearing out their roots in “independence and un beholdenness without which they cease to be what they are.” Thus, because “True art has always been a conspiracy” hatched by rebels against the old order, to remove little magazines from the creative underworld is to kill their spirit, leaving the pages it animated dry and sterile.

The last two essays—“The Donation,” a reminiscence about a blind street beggar in Vienna between the world wars, and “Noah’s Ark Revisited,” a witty biblical parody—seem out of place in a volume (as the title indicates) ostensibly devoted to social and literary polemics. While they display Pollak’s versatility, these selections, irrespective of their quality, weaken the book’s overall unity.

Even for a small press, the design and production of *Prose and Cons* are shoddy. The title and author’s name are embossed in light gray on a dingy gray paper cover, lines slant, and the margins are skimpy. Felix Pollak’s unfettered intelligence and ebullient style deserve a brighter, more open setting. For—impassioned, ironic, perceptive, and wise—his essays sparkle with enduring truths about our society, our literature, and ourselves.